

WHAT ARE WE TEACHING OUR STUDENTS?

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The article begins with a teacher's thoughts at the end of the school week and some of the expectations placed on present day classroom teachers. Responsibility of public school students and respect from public school students are discussed. A discussion of the involvement of teachers, schools, and parents in helping students succeed and the provisions that are in place to help students pass are also included. This takes a hard look at what the public schools are really being asked to do for students.

It is Friday and the final bell of the school day rings, students leave, the halls are silent, and the school week is over. Leaning back in my chair I close my eyes and reflect on the week. What did I teach my students this week? Was I an effective teacher? Did I fulfill my contractual obligations?

It is hard to believe I am doing a good job when 80% of my students fail to turn in assigned homework, 40% either do not complete or don't turn in class work, and 50% do not pass major exams. When I ask them about this, the students say they don't care because they will be passed on to the next grade anyway. They always are. At most, the students tell me, they will have to go to summer school where they will hang out with friends, do a little easy work, and play games. To make matters worse, I have been told I cannot give a failing grade to more than 10% of my students. If I have more than 10% failures, I will be put on a growth plan because if I were an effective teacher, I wouldn't have that many failures. The sad thing is that I am not alone. Many other teachers are in the same dilemma.

The state mandates that students are taught certain information based on their standards. The federal government dictates that our students master certain information based on their standards. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) enacted in 2004 has been the backbone for federal standards. Today this law has been gutted through Executive action

and states can choose whether or not to follow NCLB as originally legislated. States which choose not to follow NCLB are given waivers by the Department of Education. Federal control remains even though educational standards have been relaxed. School districts must balance both sets of requirements in their attempt to educate children.

An article written by Robert K. Blomstedt (1996), talks about the five "R's." We grew up hearing about the three "R's" of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic, but this article added two more – responsibility and respect. While all five of these ideas are dependent on each other in some form, the following discussion will focus on responsibility and respect because without these two, there is not much learning of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

Responsibility

Unfortunately, many have taken the position that NCLB intended for teachers to be the ones solely responsible for student learning. If the student fails, it is the fault of the teacher. This cannot realistically be the meaning of NCLB. The teacher is required to provide a high quality, meaningful experience for the children in the classroom. This is the essence of the teacher's job. If a teacher isn't fulfilling this obligation, s/he should be (re)trained so s/he is able to do so or be replaced to maintain quality in the classroom.

"The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world that places the majority of the burden for learning on the shoulders of teachers. This notion is alien to teachers in most of the countries that are our competitors in the new global economy" (Gardner, 2011, p.1). Even the best teachers are not effective when their students are not interested and have no encouragement from home. Where is the responsibility of the parents? Does parental responsibility cease as soon as the child steps into a school classroom for the first time (Gardner, 2011)?

A large part of the problem is society. In 1946, Harry Truman signed the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (P.L. 79-396) which created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and provided free and reduced priced lunches for qualified school children. (Wikipedia) In 1966, Lyndon Johnson expanded the NSLP with the Child Nutrition Act to include breakfast. Today some districts provide an evening meal and some provide meals throughout the summer (Wikipedia). Some school districts have bathed children, washed their hair, and given them clean clothes because of the condition in which they came to school. No one believes that children should go to school hungry, be made to do without enough food, or wear clothes so dirty that they were offensive to the other children; however, when the government takes on the role as sole provider, parents may then decide they have no responsibility. Has the federal government fostered a climate of relaxed responsibility for the parent? Is so, how may this trend of parental non-responsibility be reversed?

Before the 1980's students were actually expected to bring materials to class. The student who forgot had to quickly beg or borrow the needed supplies because there was no excuse for not completing work. Having minimal materials was something everyone knew was needed and expected. If work was not completed or not turned in, a failing grade

was recorded. If a test was failed, there was no repeating for lack of studying. Exceptions were made on a case by case basis, there was not a blanket system to cover everyone and let everyone continually repeat and redo. Did the schools inadvertently teach students that someone else would be responsible for their lack of performance? If so, how may this trend of student non-responsibility be reversed?

As the 1970's and 1980's came and went, part of our dedication in teaching responsibility went with it. Students are allowed to turn in assignments late, redo botched assignments, and retake tests multiple times in an effort to pass. In the 1980's when students came to class with no materials, teachers were strongly encouraged to request that students bring pencils, give them extra points for bringing the pencils, and then keep the pencils to hand out each class period so students would have something with which to write. Report card grades could be no less than "50" regardless of the student's average so if the student decided to turn in work one out of the three six weeks' grading periods, s/he would possibly pass for the semester. Once again, how may this trend of student non-responsibility be reversed?

What has changed in the 21st century? If little Johnny doesn't pass, often the first thought expressed is "What's wrong with that teacher?" or "It's not his fault he doesn't understand. The teacher doesn't explain well enough." When students fail so many subjects that they are required to repeat the grade, what do school districts do now? Some districts have a four week half day summer school so students can attend and then be passed to the next grade. Some schools bus these children to nearby districts (at the district's expense) to attend summer school. Again, parents do not have to pay, children go to school for three to four hours a day for four weeks and move on to the next grade. Why bother to study that much if passing means you get to hang out

with your friends in a nice air-conditioned place for a short period of time and complete minimal work? These are usually the students who refuse to turn in work, refuse to work in class, retake tests multiple times to pass, and generally don't care. Society wonders how a student could not care about making a passing grade. In some districts students are not allowed to fail regardless of their work quality and quantity. Administrators and teachers will prop up the students that make absolutely no effort. Teachers are reprimanded if they have more than a very small percentage of failures. Minimal requirements will be further lowered to accommodate even the most unmotivated of students. These students are eventually graduated with no need to persevere (Hoenig, 2008). Of course, this feeling that effort is not required will carry forward to the work place and to arenas of higher education. A student work ethic is not required in order to graduate. How is this trend of student non-responsibility to be reversed?

Our students quickly learn that assuming responsibility for one's actions is not necessary. Someone else is to blame for all their problems. Blame shifting is visible at all levels of society.

Media quickly shares examples of individuals, corporations, politicians, and schools that shirk their responsibility and attempt to place the blame for a problem on others. Rev Vieira's (2011) thoughts on responsibility mirror the thinking of many in the field of education. He says that "Students who refuse to accept responsibility for their actions will make excuses and blame everyone and everything for their failures to hand in homework or complete class assignments. 'It's not my fault,' means that it's someone else's fault—usually the school's or teacher's. These 'excuse-students' will never change their negative habits because they see themselves as victims. Worse, they become increasingly angry and resentful towards anyone who

insists that they take responsibility for their self-destructive behavior" (Vieira, 2011, p1)

Course make-up sessions, credit recovery, and attendance recovery are standard procedure in almost all school districts across the country (Gardner, 2012). Low graduation rates prompt educators to be innovative and creative with credits. Credit recovery provides a quick and efficient method of having a student make up, in a few days, what takes other students an entire semester. Computer aided instruction makes the recovery easy to administer. Students sit before the computer screen and, after reading a selection of information, will complete a multiple choice assessment. Of course, the student is given several chances to find the correct answer.

Responsibility comes first. It is hard to respect a system that does everything for the student, asks little of the student, and blames everyone else if the student fails.

Respect

"When a child is disrespectful to teachers or classmates, the first source to consider is the behavior of the adults in this child's life. Children who aren't treated with respect have no model for respectful behavior (Nelsen, Escobar, Ortolano, Duffy, and Owen-Sohocki, 2001). They may be treating people like their parents treat them. An internet blog by Rev Vieira provides his thoughts about respect and responsibility. He says that "students who have no respect for their parents will have none for their teachers. If children don't listen at home, they will not listen at school. Disrespectful students disrupt classrooms, making it impossible for teachers to teach and other students to learn" (Vieira, 2011, p.1). The teacher who allows students to act disrespectfully towards him/her isn't modeling respect and is enabling bad behavior.

Many educators agree that our students have learned that respect for others is not a necessary attribute. Some students want to

be the center of attention and do so by acting disrespectfully toward others. Some cultures consider women as second-class citizens and this carries forward to the classroom because they feel that female educators are not worthy of respect. Educators are often assaulted by students which may lead to hospitalization, disability, or permanent damage. According to the United States Department of Education, approximately 127,000 public school teachers were physically attacked at school during the 2007-2008 school year. Another 222,000 teachers were threatened by students with acts of violence (Simpson, 2011). In an age of little respect and less responsibility, it is almost impossible to succeed on the first three R's on which schools are supposed to concentrate.

We often compare the academic success of U.S. students with that of Asian students and the U.S. students come up lacking. Why is this? According to Hoenig (2008), Asian students revere and respect their teachers and internalize the phrase "Knowledge is Power." In the U.S., many students learn to work the system. If drastic action were taken against a student who committed a serious offense, the school would receive unfavorable media attention and possibly be deemed as an unsafe school.

To keep this from happening, schools take very little action, the students know they have gotten away with something, and the teachers have to deal with more disruptive behavior. Most teachers work hard and are dedicated to the profession in spite of the insults, threats, and abuse they sometimes receive from students, parents, and occasionally from administrators. Many people tell teachers how grateful they are to the teachers but do little to support them. The media focuses on mostly negative stories about schools. The attention is given to crime in the schools and the teacher that may have been involved in drugs or sex at the school. Little positive news is ever reported. As a result, society does not respect teachers and education in general. (Hoenig, 2008).

Students are not just disrespectful to teachers and administrators, they are disrespectful to each other. The profanity and the bullying that happens at school is rampant. When walking down the halls of our public schools, constant profanity is flying around the hall. Students bully the classmates that are different from them. This bullying takes place at school physically and verbally and in cyberspace for the world to hear and see. Too many times this behavior is accepted as the "norm." This type of behavior needs to become unacceptable for our society. Schools and classrooms are not the place for profanity and bullying from or toward anyone. What can be done to reduce disrespect and bullying?

Conclusion

Answers to problems of student responsibility and respect are often elusive. Teachers and administrators must work together to model respect toward students and present a united front when dealing with these problems. Administrators support for teachers is imperative. The administrators who don't support their teachers are roadblocks on the road to improvement. Support and cooperation between teachers and administrators are the beginning of improved student behavior. Disrespect from students should not be tolerated regardless of family background or interference from the parents. Students know how to work the educational system. The real world does not ask potential employees about their family background or take that into consideration when looking at job performance. If a person were on a job site, how long would he/she be paid for being there and doing either sloppy work or no work at all? Would it be acceptable to keep other employees from completing their jobs?

Are we teaching our students that mediocrity is acceptable when we allow up to four teams in an athletic district to advance to playoffs and when some schools allow for

more than one valedictorian in order to be "fair" and not harm the self-esteem of others (Stumpenhorst, 2012)? It is difficult to respect a system that doesn't respect itself and doesn't value achievement and quality work.

We provide materials for students to use in class when they don't bring any, we offer tutoring before and after school and in many cases during school, we promote students who fail, we pay expenses for students to attend summer school so they can advance to the next grade, we inflate grades, and we don't give homework because the students won't complete it. We have provided all these things, but have we required the students to learn, take responsibility, and be respectful? Have we educated our children? Evidence shows we are teaching our children many thoughts and skills that are unintended.

Is government overregulation the answer? Should we have more standards, end of course tests, standardized tests, standardized curriculum (i.e. C-Scope), and money to ensure student success? Has it worked so far?

We leave this with more questions than ever. What could parents do to reverse this trend? It depends on the child and the parents. Many children and parents do not have the problems discussed in this paper. The ones with problems appear to be getting most of the attention. How can schools reverse the trend toward the non-responsibility attitude of our students? Is it really the job of the schools?

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